

# 5 Looking for Better Opportunities

## An Analysis of Guinean Graduates' Agency

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### INTRODUCTION

Young Guinean graduates' future dreams are quite clear: first, they want to generate a steady and respectable income that enables them and their families to lead a secure and decent life. However, they face prevailing uncertainties that make the fulfilment of this aspiration more and more difficult: as opposed to the period of Guinea's first president Ahmed Sékou Touré between 1958 and 1984, when graduates were guaranteed employment by the state (Camara 2014: 165), gaining a regular salary after their university studies is a major problem today. According to young graduates, their professional objectives are best reached by finding a post in the private sector, especially in one of the well-paying mining companies. Of course they would also welcome employment in the state's administration – not out of prestige or due to the salary, but because it offers social security. Second, in order to be considered as adults and recognised members of their society, young graduates long for marriage and having children. In Kankan, being married and having children is very important for a woman's social status. Hence, women are exposed to much pressure from their families. A male's status, in contrast, is very much interlinked with the image of the family-provider.

Drawing on the life of Djénabou, a 30-year-old woman who holds a Bachelor's degree in political philosophy from the Julius Nyeréré University in Kankan, this contribution closely looks at the agency of young

graduates in a Muslim environment.<sup>1</sup> It asks how Djénabou's past habits and the imagination of her future influence the evaluation of her actual situation and thus trigger her everyday practices. How does she seek to seize and hold on to an elusive future? By taking Djénabou's account as its starting point, this contribution more generally traces young graduates' past experiences, as well as their fears, hopes and desires regarding an imagined future. Finally, it analyses the differences between male and female graduates' strategies to tame their uncertainties.<sup>2</sup>

In recent decades, research on (African) youth has become fashionable in social science. Regarding Guinea there are just a few authors who write about young people, most of whom concentrate on the capital city Conakry. Berliner (2005) looks at youth's religious memories and cultural transmissions, while Philipps and Grovogui (2010) and Philipps (2013) analyse youth involvement in political protests. Straker (2007; 2009) and Engeler (2008; 2015; 2016) both focus on young people and the state in the Forest Region. Finally, Dessertine (2013) examines young people

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**1** | I do not perceive ›being young‹ as having a certain age but rather in relation to a specific context (Durham 2000). The local definition of youth in Kankan is very flexible. It does not refer to a particular age nor does being married, having children, or having a good job directly mean a person has become an adult. Youth also refers to a person's attitude, for example spending time with young people or being concerned about their preoccupations. One aspect of being young includes having spare time. As women in Kankan have many family obligations – irrespective of whether they are married and have children or not – they are usually considered to be adults much earlier than men are. Additionally, youth as a category is referred to under specific circumstances, for instance to make claims vis-à-vis elders or the state.

**2** | This article is based on ethnographic field research (a total of twelve months between September 2011 and February 2013) for my doctoral thesis. Data gathering focused on the mapping of social actors, discourse and social practice analysis (Förster et al. 2011). Through participation in, observation of, and conversations about the everyday life of sixteen graduates (eleven of whom were male and five female) I approached their present uncertainties and future imaginations. To ensure anonymity I changed all names except in the cases of Thierno and Djénabou, who had asked to be cited by their proper names. I have translated every statement into English myself, and the original (unchanged) French version is in the footnotes.

and mobility in the Upper Guinean Region. However, there is a lack of scholarly work on young Guinean graduates (for an exception, see Engeler 2016).

Drawing upon Emirbayer and Mische (1998), the first part of this article looks at iteration, projection and evaluation as the choral triad of agency. In the second part I then recount the life trajectory of Djénabou. On the basis of this example, I discuss in the third part in a more general way the interwoven layers and diversity of young graduates' agency in dealing with uncertainty and shaping their future. I conclude by summarising and discussing the findings.

## ANALYSING AGENCY

Much of the literature on agency analyses a person's capacity to act individually in a given context, »independently of structural constraints« (Rapport and Overing 2013: 3). Agency »unfolds always through a complex interplay between individual improvisation and the dialogic imagination of a larger whole« (McLean 2007: 7). Anthropologists have criticised agency as being a eurocentric concept because it focuses too much on bargaining (Keane 2003).<sup>3</sup> Mahmood (2005), for example, suggests that we think about agency beyond the notion of resistance. In this context I do not understand agency just as bargaining based within present actions but, following Emirbayer and Mische (1998), in its three temporal dimensions. If we take into account the habitual context, the local social practices and norms, and the imagination of the future we attain a more complete and nuanced understanding of a person's agency. Emirbayer and Mische maintain that the nature of actors' experience is temporal. They see agency as

the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those struc-

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**3** | I define bargaining as any one of a number of different actions between two or more persons, groups or institutions. Bargaining occurs on a daily basis and does not necessarily contain a mutual, oral agreement – on the contrary, most bargaining processes are nonverbal.

tures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 970).

Thus, one's past experiences and habits, one's imagination of what the future may hold, and one's judgment and evaluation of the present are interconnected and constantly influence agency, even though the temporal orientation of specific actions varies.

Through their repetition and continuity, past experiences add to order and stability in an individual's identity and in their agency. Habitual actions are incorporated into thoughts and bodily experiences. In familiar situations such repetitive activities are taken for granted and, thus, are not something of which one is conscious. Through these habitual actions norms and social patterns are produced and reproduced (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 975-984). Taylor (2002: 106) sees collective practices of group life embedded in the »social imaginary«, which includes normative expectations of how things are and how they ought to be (cf. Castoriadis 1987). Norms of respectability and morality are gendered – in Kankan as well as elsewhere. Norms are imposed through positive and negative sanctions, the enforcement of which provides the individual, group or institution with power (Eriksen 2001 [1995]: 59). However, such morality is not fixed but rather shaped and reshaped through daily interactions, and therefore different conventions and practices co-exist (Olivier de Sardan 2008: 14; Rapport and Overing 2013: 7). As I argue below, habitual local norms have a huge impact on male and, especially, on female graduates' everyday lives.

Life consists of more than habits and routines. Actors constantly imagine their future, which they at times »hope for and try to bring about or fear and seek to avert« (Johnson-Hanks 2002: 872). When unknown and challenging situations arise, past experiences may not help; past responses may not fit (Förster forthcoming: 7). The result is a temporary dislocation that necessitates new, untried actions. These situations prompt the actors to scrutinise habits and past occurrences and to be creative in their search for alternatives;<sup>4</sup> it is at that point that the imagining of possible new patterns is born (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 983-993). This may result in a conflict between current local norms and the imagination of different possibilities (Rapport and Overing 2013:

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4 | On agency and creativity, see Förster and Koechlin (2011).

7). However, as the case of Djénabou will illustrate, young graduates do not always challenge the values of their elders. Along with Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 984), I agree that »the formation of projects is always an interactive, culturally embedded process by which social actors negotiate their paths toward the future [...].« Nevertheless, thanks to this »projective« or »foresightful« dimension of agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 983) people expand the horizon of their possible responses. Over the course of time, the imagination and creativity of the individual's responses may have an impact on the larger social environment if social imaginaries change (Taylor 2002).

The unpredictable but imagined future, what Crapanzano (2003: 15) calls »imaginative horizons«, also influences the third dimension of agency, namely the present situation, and vice versa. People reflect on, ponder, judge and evaluate possible responses in regard to the demands of specific, conflicting circumstances. Thus, actors constantly deal with ever-shifting settings, a conscious process of daily manoeuvring. In some circumstances they agree with and behave according to habitual practices, while in others they may have to challenge, resist, subvert and contest them. Possible courses of action are evaluated against the background of habits, on the one hand, and of imagined future trajectories, on the other hand (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 994-1002). To sum up, an individual's agency is not only influenced by contemporary bargaining processes, but also by past experiences and the opening-up of new possibilities in regard to an imagined future.

Another helpful concept for the analysis of young graduates' life situations is the theory of vital conjuncture proposed by Johnson-Hanks (2002). A vital conjuncture is a specific moment in a person's life, referred to as »a socially structured zone of possibilities« (Johnson-Hanks 2002: 871). By looking at this concept through the lenses of agency, vital conjunctures are characterised by habits through »recurring systematicness« and »structured expectations« (ibid.: 872). Imagination, for its part, is present through a high degree of uncertainty and potential transformation, in brief through »contexts of unique possibility and future orientation« (ibid.). One such vital conjuncture occurs when university studies end. This »nexus of potential social futures« (ibid.: 871) can have multiple outcomes: a young female graduate can marry, become a mother, or both, one after the other. Furthermore, she can obtain her first job, change her place of living or even emigrate. However, her husband can

also leave her, she can end up unemployed or be obliged to look after her sick parents. Thus, during such special moments full of »uncertainty, promise, or fear« (ibid.: 872) much is at stake because a person's future orientation can change radically.

The following life story shows what everyday practices of a young, female graduate in Kankan look like. I will analyse the impact of iteration and the imagination of an elusive future on the judgment and evaluation of challenging situations. My methodological approach relies on Ahearn (2001), following which I have inquired into the local young graduates' own concepts of agency:

[...] it is important to ask how people themselves conceive of their own actions and whether they attribute responsibility for events to individuals, to fate, to deities, or to other animate or inanimate forces. (Ahearn 2001: 13)

## **DJÉNABOU'S LIFE TRAJECTORY**

Djénabou was born in Kankan in 1986. She is a faithful Muslim who prays several times a day. Djénabou grew up in an area of the city with a bad reputation that is considered as poor by Kankan's inhabitants. She is of Fulani ethnicity and the seventh-oldest out of eleven siblings.<sup>5</sup> Djénabou's father is a retired tailor and the second muezzin of a nearby mosque. Her mother has been engaged in petty trade and presently sells sweets on a table in front of their house. Because of economic hardship, a friendly family raised Djénabou during her school years. Djénabou reiterated how grateful she is that they had encouraged her to study hard at school. As a result, she was always amongst the best in her class, competing with the boys rather than the other girls, as she repeatedly emphasised. Unlike many young women in Kankan – as, for example, her sisters – Djénabou

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**5** | The Fulani, numerous and wide-spread throughout West Africa, constitute one of Guinea's four main ethnic groups. In the literature, they are also referred to as Peul or Peuhl (Andrews 2013; Camara et al. 2014: 154). I consider ethnicity to be a fluid category that may change over time and can vary from place to place. Communities typically attribute to themselves shared cultural values and practices, and a shared language. They tend to place great importance on their imagined historical origins (Migdal 2004: 6; Young 2007: 250).

did not leave school after several years to marry but instead earned her diploma and wanted to go to university. Her father, however, was quite sceptical and did not like the idea of one of his daughters pursuing her educational ambitions without first getting married. The fact that all of Djénabou's elder sisters, whose husbands he had chosen for them, had separated eventually made him change his mind; she was thus able to earn a Bachelor's degree in political philosophy. While still a teenager Djénabou became a member of different NGOs.<sup>6</sup> As a result, she gained work experience, met interesting people and visited other parts of the country. Djénabou's father did not like her travelling around and being together with men. Yet he knew that this was an opportunity for his daughter to generate some income, thus contributing to the low family budget.

Equipped with her Bachelor's degree, Djénabou found a job as a teaching assistant at university. Working conditions were not favourable, but it was better than being unemployed – the fate of all too many young graduates. Whenever possible Djénabou took on other job opportunities; she was one of my two research assistants throughout my fieldwork,<sup>7</sup> and she acted as an election observer in her district during the legislative elections of 2013. She supported her family with the money she earned, for example by buying material to construct a washing area. She also paid for a water connection in the compound. Now that running water is available, Djénabou's mother is able to earn some change by letting neighbours pay to refill their tanks. In 2012 Djénabou, her elder brother and a cousin started constructing three boutiques at the nearby roadside. In this regard, Thierno, my other research assistant, admiringly remarked:

What Djénabou does for her family is not self-evident. Usually young women just think of their boyfriends and spend their money in other forms. They buy fancy

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**6** | Usually, these NGOs are not very active in daily life. However, if one of their projects is being financed (such as awareness-raising programmes prior to the presidential elections of 2010) they pursue a range of different activities.

**7** | I have elaborated elsewhere on the collaboration with research assistants in ethnographic fieldwork (Ammann, Kaiser-Grolimund and Staudacher 2016).

dresses and shoes to wear for the next wedding or a new cell phone or even a KTM [trendy, Chinese motorcycle]. (Informal conversation 24 February, 2012.)<sup>8</sup>

Whenever we met elderly people, they praised Djénabou for being not only smart but also faithful, respectful and helpful. After teaching at university she usually returned home immediately to cook for everybody. However, Djénabou's university studies, her engagement in the NGOs and, above all, her financial support of the family have not escaped criticism. Some of her elder brothers and sisters do not like the fact that she has succeeded where they have not.

Djénabou is not married yet, but she hopes to find an appropriate husband soon: an intellectual who understands her and will treat her well. He has to be faithful, monogamous and supportive of her decision to engage in various activities. However, Djénabou is keenly aware that finding a husband who matches her imagination will not be easy: »I am one of my family's hopes. If I marry and the marriage fails, my family will suffer,« Djénabou wrote (letter 21 June, 2013).<sup>9</sup> Even though she is not a mother yet, Djénabou assumed this role some years ago when she started caring for her homonym, who is the daughter of a relative.<sup>10</sup> When it comes to men, Djénabou behaves according to local Fulani norms. During the time of research, she was seeing a young man whom she knew from her school days. Djénabou was very careful not to visit his family too often because, she explained, otherwise a future marriage would not be well regarded. Djénabou also emphasised that she remains a virgin. This fact not only makes her parents proud but also increases her attraction as a future wife.

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**8 |** »Ce que Djénabou fait pour sa famille, ce n'est pas évident du tout. Normalement les jeunes filles pensent seulement à leur copain et surtout comment acheter des nouvelles robes et souliers pour le prochain mariage. Ou bien elles s'achètent un portable ou même une KTM.«

**9 |** »Je suis un des espoirs de ma famille, si je me marie et que ça échoue c'est ma famille qui souffrira.«

**10 |** In Guinea, homonyms are people with the same first name. The relationship between homonyms is often very close. In Kankan it is not uncommon during childhood to spend some time in the family of one's homonym. On reasons for child fosterage in neighbouring Sierra Leone, see Bledsoe (1990).



It is very complicated to be a Fulani. If a young Fulani woman becomes pregnant without being married, she has no value anymore; her father feels like she has dishonoured him and his authority. I don't want this happening to me! (Informal discussion 15 March, 2012.)<sup>11</sup>

Djénabou is afraid that her father will run out of patience and try to marry her to someone she does not like, as he already once before tried to do, in the summer of 2012. The suitor, a close friend of her father's and a distant relative, already had a wife. According to Djénabou he did not treat women respectfully and was very egoistic. Therefore, she refused to marry him.

With the financial help of a cousin, Djénabou could start a Master's degree in human resources at a private university in Conakry in autumn 2013. In the evenings she attended additional classes, for example in computer science. During her free time she was busy writing poems and a novel. At the beginning of her stay in Conakry, Djénabou lived with her aunt, but tense relations in the house became too stressful for her. With the approval of her father she then moved in with the family of a friendly female student. After graduation Djénabou was lucky enough to find temporal employment in a project. Suddenly she acquired the label *directrice du cabinet* (cabinet director) and found herself in a fancy office. She happily wrote: »Thank God I have this contract. My life will change soon« (letter 28 August, 2014).<sup>12</sup> However, Djénabou quit the job after not receiving her salary for two consecutive months. In fact, she is still à la recherche d'opportunités d'emploi (looking for job opportunities) in Conakry. If it does not work out well in the capital city she plans to go back to Kankan, where she would again take up her teaching and NGO activities.

On the one hand, Djénabou has high hopes regarding her future; she dreams of becoming a foreign ambassador someday. On the other hand, she is aware that her chances of ever getting steady employment are quite slim. Nevertheless, she is optimistic: »With my new degree and my

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**11** | »Chez nous les Peuls, c'est très compliqué. Si tu tombes en grossesse hors mariage, tu n'as plus de valeur. Le père pense que tu as défié son autorité. Je ne veux pas que ça m'arrive!«

**12** | »Dieu merci j'ai eu ce contrat. Ma vie changera bientôt.«

relations, hope is still very big« (letter 25 March, 2014).<sup>13</sup> Djénabou's most urgent problem, however, is not her job situation but her marriage plans:

I think I will marry soon because my whole family dreams just of that. When I come back [from Conakry] there will be much pressure on me. The Master's degree was my excuse, but now, you see... I grow older and now I want to marry. (Letter 15 March, 2014.)<sup>14</sup>

## **BETWEEN SEARCHING FOR A JOB AND LOOKING FOR A HUSBAND**

If I could choose between a job and a husband, I would not know which one to take. (Mariam, young graduate, informal conversation, 6 March, 2012.)<sup>15</sup>

### **Dreaming of marriage**

Djénabou is still a virgin and belongs to the Fulani. According to Djénabou, the latter aspect complicates her search for a future husband, a man she would like to choose herself, for two reasons: among the Fulani virginity has immense social and economic value, and because marriages within extended families are common (Furth 2005: 237-241; Andrews 2013: 52). Virginity is of huge importance in other ethnic groups as well. However, according to local discursive formations norms are more restrictive within the Fulani, who are said to practice a restrained form of Islam (Gordon 2000: 319; Steady 2011: 64). Marrying and having children is highly important for a woman's respect and place in Guinean society (Doubouya 2008: 77; Engeler 2015: 103-121).<sup>16</sup> Usually, women marry

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**13** | »Avk c nvo diplom e mes rlat6n l espoir est encor tres grand.«

**14** | »G pnse m marier osi kr toute la fmille n rev ke d sa e a mn rtour il aura la pression sr moi le master etait mon excuse mais a present tu vois... j'avance en age e j ai envie maintenant d m marier.«

**15** | »Si on me donnait un bon emploi ou un mari à choisir, je ne serais pas quoi prendre...«

**16** | The special issue of *Africa Today* (N.N. 2016) offers more information on ethnographic examples regarding marriage in African countries as well as providing an overview on various issues that have been in the focus of anthropological research.

and have children at an early age. I was told that some young women therefore fear to start university without first marrying.

Although Djénabou is not married yet, she took on the role of a foster mother for her homonym. This decision is clearly future-oriented. In a socially accepted way it enables her to learn how to care for a child and thus become a ›good‹ mother in an imagined future. In general, studying is an accepted excuse to postpone marriage; but as soon as Djénabou finished her Master's degree in summer 2014, the pressure from her family increased. It is still not easy for a young woman in Kankan to choose her future husband; high social and economic pressures prevail (cf. Whitehouse 2016). Thus, the problem is not marriage itself but, instead, the major challenge is to find a worthy husband who will not make her future life too difficult, as Djénabou repeatedly complained. She successfully managed to convince her father that his friend would not be a suitable husband for her. However, Djénabou is unsure whether he would accept her refusal a second time.

An additional problem is that female students and graduates have a bad reputation; gossip about sexual favours or prostitution is omnipresent (cf. Brand 2001; Sommers 2010: 327; Honwana 2012: 91-94). Some men are wary of intellectual women and suspect that they are more likely than illiterate women to oppose the practice of polygamy. And the facts bear out this suspicion: polygamy rates for well-educated and illiterate women are 33 per cent and 56 per cent, respectively (République de Guinée 2006: 97). The last woman a man wishes to marry is one who, knowing that she is his intellectual superior, dares to disobey him. Popular belief has it that such behaviour immediately leads to the cursing of the children and that marriage to such a ›rebel‹ invariably ends in divorce.

Djénabou is aware that polygamy is an integral part of Guinean society. She stressed that she is not opposed to polygamy in principal, as long as the man lives up to his duties as defined in the Qur'an: to feed the whole family and to accord equal treatment to his wives. She complained, however, that in reality this is never the case and that was why she dreaded the prospect of ending up in a polygamous household. How to find an appropriate husband – somebody who would treat her well and support her various activities – was a constant topic of conversation for female graduates like Djénabou. She and her friend Aishatou, who holds a Bachelor's degree in sociology, explained:

A woman who has been to university has a bad reputation. People imagine things. Perhaps this has some truth to it, but it is not always the truth. People say: ›Oh, an educated woman is full of herself. She wants to dominate the household.‹ So not many men want to accept and understand you if you have been to university. If your education achieves a higher level, you are already rejected by a certain part of the society; you are not highly esteemed. (Group discussion 29 January, 2013.)<sup>17</sup>

Marrying and founding a family is also a huge challenge for male graduates. However, for them it is less a question of finding an adequate wife and more of having enough money, first, to pay for the expensive wedding, and second, to settle down. Typically, male graduates dream about constructing their own house where they could take care of their whole family. According to local public opinion men should be the family's primary breadwinners, and this puts much pressure on male graduates. Consequently, in Guinea like in most other West African countries, founding a family has become increasingly difficult for young men and, hence, they marry much later than women (Sommers 2010: 326-327; Honwana 2012: 104; Whitehouse 2016: 33).<sup>18</sup> Sory, a 30-year-old tutor, rhetorically asked: »Now I feel like marrying, but how can I do that...?« (Interview 24 December, 2012.)<sup>19</sup>

### **Imagining being a ›good‹ woman**

In her article *Bargaining with Patriarchy* Kandiyoti (1988) argues that women strategically bargain different aspects in life to enhance their social security and personal advantages without fundamentally challenging male supremacy. Following this approach, Avishai, Gerber and Randes (2012: 404) write that »women are strategic actors who navigate and appropriate

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**17 |** »Donc aussi une fille qui a été à l'uni est mal vu par la société, les gens se font des imaginations. Peut-être il y a une part de vérité, mais ce n'est pas toujours vérité. On dit: ›Ah, une femme qui a été à l'école est orgueilleuse, intègre, elle veut toujours dominer le foyer.‹ Donc peut d'homme veulent t'accepter et te comprendre si tu as été à l'uni. Si tes études atteignent le niveau supérieur, déjà tu es rejetée d'une certaine manière par la société, tu es mal vu.«

**18 |** Whereas in Guinea only 3 per cent of women are still celibate at the age of twenty-five, 44 per cent of men are not yet married at this stage (République de Guinée 2006: 96).

**19 |** »Maintenant j'ai envie de me marier, mais comment faire...?«

a complex terrain of domestic, economic, and religious practices and expectations in meeting the demands of contemporary life.« In other words, women, especially well-educated young graduates in Kankan and elsewhere, understand the rules of the game and know how to play it. And sometimes they imagine new or slightly different rules.

Among all the possible futures, becoming a ›good‹ woman is a central identity for most young women in Kankan, regardless of their educational, ethnic or economic backgrounds. Djénabou tries to obtain this attribute by adhering to local social norms: for example, she follows the ritual prayers, neither smokes nor drinks alcohol, and dresses properly.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, Djénabou is respectful towards her parents, elderly relatives and neighbours. Most importantly, however, she does not consort with young men. This behaviour is based on habitual knowledge and is oriented towards an imagined future yet, at the same time, increases her bargaining power in the present. By creating an image of herself as a ›good‹, young Muslim woman, Djénabou hopes to attain several goals: first, elderly family members and neighbours respect her; and second, she has gained her father's confidence. Like this she could travel around for her workshops and to study in Conakry, which is far away from her nuclear family. When Djénabou did not get along with her aunt, her father approved of her moving to a friendly family. Above all, behaving like a ›good‹ young woman enabled her to pursue her academic ambitions and to put off marriage. Because Djénabou always obeyed her father's strictures on dating, she found herself in a good bargaining position when she opposed his choice of a husband; her judgment was respected because her behaviour had been impeccable.

In Kankan women must subordinate themselves to men. From an emic understanding – and in reference to the Qur'an – a woman's (future) children will be cursed if she does not do so. Here, the children metaphorically stand for women's success in the time yet to come. People claim that recent deeds have imminent consequences in an imagined future. Thus, by behaving according to the locally proclaimed gender norms, women may obtain a favourable future. However, if they do

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**20** | Such dress codes include covering one's legs and not wearing tight trousers. However, different rules exist regarding dressing by day and by night (cf. McGovern 2015: 254).

not conduct themselves accordingly, their future will be under threat.<sup>21</sup> This menace is used as an effective means to enforce the status quo in a patriarchal society. Many men and women, among them Djénabou, see this as an explanation for gender hierarchy in Kankan.

Djénabou subordinates herself to her father, brothers and other men. She does not usually call this habitual practice into question. However, being a young intellectual woman in a place like Kankan, where a strict understanding of gender norms prevails, is not always easy. There are instances when Djénabou, like other female graduates, challenges the habit of female subordination. Djénabou and her friend Aishatou once lamented:

It is true: a woman must submit to her husband. I think this is the case in every community. But here, it is not just that; here, it has a slavish aspect. Women are not allowed to say what they think, they are never right. Everything men do is good, everything women do is bad. And when we went to school we started looking at the world differently. It is hard for us to accept this perception. (Group discussion 29 January, 2013.)<sup>22</sup>

Djénabou and Aishatou state that because of their educational background and NGO activities they are aware of certain forms of gender-related injustice. Their harsh critique must be seen in the context of the difficult social and economic reality that women in Kankan face. On the one hand, they are to behave according to social norms and subordinate themselves to men; on the other hand, they have to gain sufficient resources to sustain their families at times when their husbands

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**21** | This is also described by Osborn (2011: 28): »Epics, oral traditions, and family histories throughout Mande are sprinkled with women whose humility, courage, sacrifice, and loyalty generate a ›maternal inheritance‹ that enables their children, and especially their sons, to perform great deeds.«

**22** | »C'est vrai, il faut que la femme soit soumise à son mari, je pense que ça existe dans toutes les communautés. Mais ici, c'est pas seulement ça, il y a un côté esclavagiste dedans. La femme n'a pas droit à la parole, elle n'a pas raison, elle ne doit pas discuter. Tout ce que l'homme fait est bon et tout ce que la femme fait est mauvaise. Et quand on a été à l'école on a compris la vie d'une autre manière. C'est difficile d'accepter cette conception pour nous.« Kaufmann (2016) made similar observations in Liberia.

or fathers are not capable of doing so. Nevertheless, men remain the heads of the household.

Djénabou is a Muslim. By and large, religion is very present in the lives of Guinea's population, for the young and the elderly, intellectuals and illiterates alike. Religion as a basic principle penetrates all spheres of people's lives, and it shapes their daily experiences (Smid 2010: 49). Islam is an integral and stabilising element in Djénabou's identity. She respects local Muslim principles and does not question her family's religious practices. Her future husband must be religious too, Djénabou emphasised several times. She refers to God when talking about her future plans. According to Djénabou's explanations, He watches her closely. If she is a ›good‹ woman in the present, this will influence her future in a positive way.

Behaving according to local social norms is also important for male graduates. Similar to Djénabou, they refer to God when elaborating on their dreams. Mamy, who was born in 1984, holds a Master's degree in sociology and works as a tutor at university. While speaking about his academic ambitions, he explained:

I set an objective, but I am also a Muslim, I believe in destiny, in God. [...] God knows how much I learned at school, God knows that I am responsible with my parents and my surroundings. He knows that the little I earn I give to my parents. And this same God said that if a child is looking for the blessing of his parents, He would give this child what it requests. So I believe God will give this to me. In regard to academia I also believe in my future. [...] I want to continue my studies. In three years' time I want to have my PhD, if God gives me good health and the financial means. [...] I will not obtain it [my PhD] easily, while sleeping. I must fight. (Interview 5 February, 2013.)<sup>23</sup>

**23** | »Je fixe un objectif, mais aussi, je suis musulman, je crois au destin, en Dieu. [...] Dieu sait que je me suis battu à l'école, Dieu sait que je suis sérieux avec mes parents et mon entourage. Il sait que le peu que je gagne, je le mets à la disposition de mes parents. Et ce même Dieu a dit quand un enfant cherche la bénédiction auprès de ses parents il va donner à cet enfant ce qu'il demande. Donc je crois que Dieu va me donner ça. Mais sur le plan scientifique je crois aussi à mon avenir. [...] je cherche à continuer mes études. Dans trois ans, je veux avoir

For Mamy, only God knows what his future may hold; He is the one who predestines life. This however does not result in passiveness. On the contrary, by behaving according to local Muslim principles Mamy actively tries to influence his future: he is respectful to elders and sends money to his parents in the village whenever he can. Furthermore, Mamy works hard and takes his studies seriously. As a consequence he receives the blessing from his parents. Due to this blessing, God will help Mamy to achieve his goals. Like other young graduates, Mamy actively participates in his divine destiny and thereby assumes responsibility over his life.

### **Improving one's chances by studying**

Generally, not many young women in Guinea can study.<sup>24</sup> Female students must cook and do other domestic work and thus cannot invest much time in learning and other activities. Typically, they are strongly guarded and their behaviour is more critically observed than that of their male counterparts.

Guinean graduates regard their university studies as a privilege. At the same time, their academic background implies specific expectations for their future life trajectories. For Djénabou education has always been the key to success, thanks largely to the fact that her homonym's family encouraged her to work hard at school. Djénabou's imaginative horizon features a vision of herself as a caring mother who, at the same time, pursues her professional goals, a supportive, religious husband by her side. Aware that for this vision to become reality she had to acquire further

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mon doctorat, si Dieu me donne la santé et les moyens [...]. Je n'aurais pas facilement [mon doctorat], pas en dormant, il faut me battre.»

**24** | The difference between the high number of men and the low number of women at university level is striking (République de Guinée 2006: 37-38). However, this is not a Guinean particularity but a matter of fact throughout Africa; only six per cent of professors at African universities are women (Mama 2007: 4; cf. Okeke-Ihejirika 2009). Writing about Cameroon, Johnson-Hanks remarks that girls who can complete high school »have been unusually successful and their modes of action effective« (Johnson-Hanks 2005: 367), especially insofar as it is much more difficult for girls than for boys to mobilise the necessary financial means to attend school.



professional qualifications, she decided to continue her academic studies in Conakry.

Once they hold a Bachelor's degree young graduates' studies do not come to an end. Knowing that the job market is tough, male as well as female graduates see further education as a key to fulfil their future dreams. English and computer science are the most popular courses offered by private evening schools or workshops on weekends; and it is with such qualifications that young graduates hope to have a better chance on the job market. Similar to Djénabou, many Guinean graduates dream about continuing their academic career. They wish to go abroad on a scholarship, to a place where the educational system is better than in Guinea. In their imagination, they would expand their scientific knowledge and get to know other ways of life; once they return to their country, they would have earned the esteem of their community and improved their chances of finding long-term employment. This imagination is influenced by the life trajectories of important Guinean politicians, such as Alpha Condé, Guinea's president since 2010, who studied political science and holds a PhD in public law from the French university of Sorbonne (Camara et al. 2014: 91).<sup>25</sup> My male interlocutors in particular have the ambition of playing a decisive role in the future of their country. Mamy stated:

Some of my students call me the future president of the Republic because I have a project, a goal. [...] I tell myself I must serve my country. If in the future someone calls upon the leaders of Guinea, it will be necessary to call upon Mamy Konaté. [...] It is in my dreams: I want to become one of tomorrow's indispensable cadres of this country, and I want to sit at the table to discuss the problems. (Interview 5 February, 2013.)<sup>26</sup>

Personal connections are crucial to access the labour market. For this reason young graduates actively shape their networks: after graduation

**25** | Kaufmann (2016: 172-176) also describes studying as a strategy for social mobility in the context of post-war Liberia.

**26** | »Certains de mes étudiants m'appellent futur président de la république parce que j'ai un projet, un objectif. [...] Je me dis je dois servir la Guinée. Quand on va appeler la maison de la Guinée, il faut qu'on appelle Mamy Konaté. [...] C'est dans mes rêves, je veux être un cadre incontournable de ce pays de demain, je sois à la table pour discuter des problèmes.«

new contacts are made, old ones are intensified and others fade or disappear. By continuing their studies young graduates can integrate into new social networks, which may prove helpful one day.

### **Looking for opportunities**

Even though Mammy's future dreams of first gaining a PhD and then becoming an important Guinean leader are quite explicit, he is well aware of the country's difficult economic, political and social situation. Therefore he, Djénabou and other graduates always try to pursue the most promising path that could help them one day to achieve their goals. Johnson-Hanks (2005) uses the term »judicious opportunism« to describe this constant evaluation of the present under circumstances in which uncertainty prevails. She states: »The challenge is not to formulate a plan and implement it regardless of what comes but to adapt to the moment, to be calm and supple, recognizing the difference between a promising and an unpromising offer« (Johnson-Hanks 2005: 370).

This continual search for new work opportunities is also present in Djénabou's accounts. After she graduated from university she feared that she would be unemployed, just like most of her peers. When her professor offered her a position as a teaching assistant at university, she accepted despite the bad work conditions there. Djénabou supplemented her small income whenever possible with other temporary jobs, for example, for one of the various NGOs of which she was a member. Elections, as such, create possibilities to get hold of a short-term job. Djénabou acted as an election observer, and Sory was an operator for voter registration. Most of my informants support one of the three significant political parties in Kankan, and they helped in election campaigns for the presidential elections of 2010 and the parliamentary elections of 2013. Djénabou, however, has deliberately never joined a political party because, as she told me, she wanted to remain neutral to keep her image as a bridge-builder and be able to do her different jobs in the NGOs (informal conversation 28 November, 2012).

In general, women's income is seen as supplementary, and men remain the primary breadwinners. The fact that Djénabou contributes substantially to her family's income has earned her entourage's respect. Therefore, the tight family budgets and the general financial uncertainties generate space for Djénabou to manoeuvre as

well as providing her with a certain amount of power: she successfully convinced her parents that they would one day benefit from her qualifications. This was why Djénabou's father had to accept her attendance at workshops outside of Kankan. Although he generally disapproves of her travelling around and, thus, associating with men, he acknowledges her occasional income.

One day I was sitting in a café near the university and listened to a fierce discussion between two male students over the kind of employment that was suitable for a graduate. One student claimed that graduates should not accept a job, such as teaching in a primary school, that was not appropriate for them due to their educational background. »You have to choose at your level. Someone who wants a motorcycle does not want a bike,« he argued.<sup>27</sup> The other student disagreed. He said that he would accept any job offered to him, even cleaning the streets, as long as he earned something. »If you are poor, you have no choice,« he stressed (field notes 1 March, 2012).<sup>28</sup> The example shows that it is not only the salary but also a job's reputation that is of importance when evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of a certain job. This could be the reason why young graduates usually do not talk openly about their income-generating activities.

Throughout the day male young graduates, just like non-graduates, are busy with all kind of different things. Such »hustling« (Kaufmann 2016: 166-172) is not easy to understand for an outsider. Some of Kankan's male graduates have started their own small commercial enterprise with the help of so-called big people.<sup>29</sup> Amadou for example now owns two video shops; Saa organised transports between his hometown Guéckédou and Conakry for a period of time; Labila temporarily sold spices on the market and drove a motorbike taxi; and Ismael still earns money by »traditionally« pressing cloths.<sup>30</sup> In Fioratta's (2015: 304) terms, such male youth is »constantly on the lookout for entrepreneurial opportunities«. However,

**27** | »Il faut décider à la hauteur. Qui veut une moto ne veut pas un vélo.«

**28** | »Le fils d'un pauvre n'a pas le choix.«

**29** | On the concept of Big Men, see Utas (2012).

**30** | In regard to young people in the Fouta Djallon, Fioratta (2015: 302-303) writes: »To show their families and communities that they were, or were becoming, responsible adult persons, both men and women occupied themselves with entrepreneurial ventures that counted as respectable work, even when their efforts yielded little or no profit.«

none of my female informants started their own businesses, although some do help their mothers or relatives to sell items on the market or in a boutique. As opposed to male graduates, female graduates usually do not hustle, and they must reveal exactly where they are going and why everytime they leave home.

Some graduates teach courses at private secondary schools, and others, like Djénabou, work as tutors at university once they have completed their Bachelor's degree. This is a way of earning a low yet steady income and having the prospect of becoming a state employee. Officially, tutorship is a recruiting system for young graduates with the goal to include them into university staff. However, several tutors stay in that position for years and never become civil servants. Because of their unsatisfactory position, Guinean tutors decided to go on strike at the beginning of 2013 despite the fear of negative personal consequences.

Volunteering in the public or private sector is a way of gaining work experience and enlarging one's networks in order to get a steady job in the future.<sup>31</sup> Being a member of an NGO is another common strategy to establish new personal connections, generate an irregular income, and take part in workshops and training programs to improve one's qualifications. Both of these activities are regarded as a stepping-stone to future employment opportunities and, in some cases, they indeed prove to be.

The constant search for alternatives or secondary employment(s) is also described by Bierschenk (2014: 240) in the case of state employees in Benin, who did not have any particular future career in mind when they entered state service but instead applied for a range of jobs. However, in Bierschenk's words they have only »limited investment in what they are actually doing, and are permanently on the outlook for exit options« (ibid.). This is similar for all graduates in Kankan to whom I have spoken. All of their activities mentioned above are seen as temporal, as a possibility of making a living while waiting for better opportunities. They can be analysed as practices to get a hold on an elusive future. Thus, Johnson-Hanks is correct in claiming that »[m]aintaining options is the central aim of action under judicious opportunism« (Johnson-Hanks 2005: 370).

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**31** | Blundo and Olivier de Sardan (2006: 78) deal with unpaid jobs in African administrations.

## DISCUSSION

Between order and chaos, between continuity and change, between harmony and conflict lies uncertainty. [...] Uncertainty and insecurity are notions that link the present with the past and the future (Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckman 2000: 7).

Young former students evaluate their current situation by recalling past personal experiences and imagining possible future trajectories. The interactions between the three temporal dimensions of agency are evident in Djénabou's narrations. Her habitual religious practices, for example, have a stabilising effect on her identity. The validity of local customs, which from an emic perspective have been transmitted over generations, tends to be taken for granted. Generally, the importance of behaving properly is very much embodied in young graduates' attitudes and habitual actions: You must respect your parents and elders; women must defer to the men in their lives or otherwise their (future) offspring will be cursed. However, as Schroven rightly notes, »there is room for change within the performance of habitual rituals or the possibility to express resistance camouflaged by approval« (Schroven 2010: iii, my translation). It is by imagining potential future trajectories that these graduates create strategies to change their prospects.

Djénabou has various ideas of what she wants in her personal life. She has adopted manifold ways of daily manoeuvring to achieve her goals within the context of Kankan's patriarchal political, social and economic structures. Djénabou's past experience tells her that financial independence is a good tool at her disposal to improve her situation in an imagined future. This knowledge, and her eagerness to learn, influenced her choice of going to university in the first place and then leaving the family to continue her studies in Conakry. Djénabou attributes her present status largely to the fact that she grew up in her homonym's family. But she also accredits the fact that her father accepted her various choices to her behaviour according to local norms. At the same time, Djénabou likes to consider herself a rebel at heart who questions and, sometimes, challenges local norms; but the fact that she won from her father the right to attend university and to refuse marriage to a man who did not suit her derives only from her subordinating her will to his in other domains. Therefore, Djénabou performs a balancing act between, on the one hand,

behaving like a ›good‹ Fulani woman and, on the other hand, following her academic ambitions and pursuing her goal to lead an independent life even as a soon-to-be wife.

For young people the end of university studies marks an important stage in their lives. Graduates hope to find a secure job, for example in state administration or in the private sector, preferably in one of the mining or communication companies. Beyond this, they strive to marry and have children. Graduation is not a rupture with the past. Instead, it can be seen as a vital conjuncture marked by a high degree of uncertainty but also future opportunities and transformations (Johnson-Hanks 2002). Uncertainty over future trajectories does not prevent my interlocutors from formulating concrete ambitions. However, even though Djénabou dreams of being a foreign ambassador and Mamy dreams of completing a PhD and becoming one of Guinea's leaders, it is important to note that these are not fixed goals in accordance to which they plan their careers step by step. When talking about their future in the uncertain environment of Guinea, both choose instead to mention various possibilities depending on the available opportunities (cf. Johnson-Hanks 2005: 368).

The personal and professional aspirations of young male and female Guinean graduates, like those of educated Beti women in Cameroon, »are multiple, changeable, and apply over a variety of temporal frames« (Johnson-Hanks 2002: 867). Regarding their imagined future life trajectories, young graduates are torn between hopes and disillusionment evoked by daily realities. As there are almost no possibilities to find fixed employment, they must simultaneously apply different livelihood strategies »while waiting« and looking for better opportunities. The notion of »waithood« (Honwana 2012) is prominent in many conversations with young graduates in Kankan over their job situations. However, their daily practices reveal that they are not just waiting and doing nothing – on the contrary. To echo Honwana's observations: »They identify, explore, and try to maximize whatever opportunities they find in a constant effort to improve their daily lives« (Honwana 2012: 61). Hence, their action is based on ›judicious opportunism‹ (Johnson-Hanks 2005: 363). Sory put it like this:

I am evaluating the matters. In case I have a good chance elsewhere, I can also profit from that. But while waiting, I am here. We are looking for the place where living conditions are best. (Interview 24 December, 2012.)<sup>32</sup>

Young graduates launch various economic activities, accept precarious temporal employment as tutors, teach at secondary schools, gain work experience in unpaid internships, and continue their studies. However, these activities often do not satisfy young graduates' career expectations. At the same time, the different income-generating strategies help to enlarge their networks and open up new possibilities. A Guinean saying goes that the number of individuals you know equals the chances you have.

Marrying and founding a family is an important objective for Guinean graduates which enables them to occupy a respected place in society. Regarding marriage, there is a major difference between male and female graduates: men have far more time at their disposal until they come under social pressure to wed. Thus, they can primarily concentrate on establishing themselves in order to dispose of enough money to finance a pompous marriage, which is quite important for young urban women these days. In this context female graduates again must be active in two domains: first, in the search for job opportunities and, second by looking for a ›good‹ husband. While a man can wait until he is around forty years of age, a woman who is not yet married by the age of twenty-five is in a dire situation. Although it would not be too difficult for female graduates to find a husband, they typically do not imagine their future as only staying at home, taking care of the household, and caring for their husbands. On the contrary, female graduates are ambitious and therefore invest much time and energy into finding a future spouse who fits their imagination: female former students typically look for a man who provides them with sufficient liberties to pursue their own professional ambitions and who fundamentally encourages all of their various activities.<sup>33</sup> Hence, in regard

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**32** | »Je suis aussi en train de voir les choses, au cas où j'aurais une forte chance ailleurs, je peux aussi profiter de cela, mais en attendant je suis là. Nous cherchons là où les conditions de vie son meilleurs.«

**33** | Whitehouse (2016) shows the gap between the imagined, idealised future husband and the lived realities of young people in Mali. My data illustrate that this is similar in Kankan.

to marriage young female graduates form a specific category within Kankan's society and are not representative of young women in general.

By looking at young graduates' agency we see that many of their actions are oriented towards an unknown future. The daily realities of Guinean graduates are complex and ever-changing. For precisely the reason that the achievement of their future dreams seems to be so elusive, they apply various strategies to reach their goals. As Johnson-Hanks (2005: 363) rightly notes, we cannot analyse their actions in a causal way: »[...] under the conditions of uncertainty applicable in contemporary Africa, effective social action is based not on the fulfilment of prior intentions but on a judicious opportunism: the actor seizes promising chances.« It goes without saying that the permanent search for opportunities is not limited to graduates but applies to other young men and women in Guinea, too. Every decision they make to tame their unknown future creates new forms of insecurity. However, the educational background of former students does change their ambitions, their possibilities and their strategies of dealing with uncertainty. Djénabou's case is unique because she went to university even though she comes from an underprivileged background where local Muslim and Fulani norms are of huge importance and in which her parents and sisters have at best only basic, formal education.

In a context such as Guinea, which is marked by political, social and economic insecurity, nobody knows which action will finally lead to the realisation of one's ambitions. I argue, therefore, that we must investigate the interwoven layers and diversity of young graduates' agency in order to understand how they try to shape their future life trajectories. A typical pattern here is the flexibility of their actions and the multiplicity in trying to reach their goals. Furthermore, they have faith in God, who chooses what is right for someone. By behaving according to local Muslim principles Guinean graduates desire their parents' blessings. Thus, young graduates actively participate in their divine destiny: because they please God, He will help them to attain their ambitions in a future yet to come.



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